

Two Views Of Dylan's Rolling Roadside Revue

Special to the Barb

by Mike Greenstein

ROCHESTER, N.Y. -- After weeks of rumor and anticipation -- as well as some-not-so-widely-scattered remarks of disappointment and ridicule -- Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue barnstormed through Upstate New York last week in its continuing visitation of Northeastern "small halls" and theatres.

Ultimately, however, that widely publicized "small club" promise has turned out to be a sham. "Nothing but a smoke-screen," complains one disgruntled club-owner who tried unsuccessfully to land a Dylan date. "I'm sure they planned it this way."

If "they" did plan it that way, it sure as hell worked. The lure of the small hall concept, the aura of secrecy and the air of intrigue all served to stir up a lot of free publicity for the tour. Thus, when the Upstate dates finally were announced -- two shows at the 12,000 seat Niagara Falls Convention Center Nov. 15 and two shows at the 9,000 seat Rochester War Memorial Nov. 17 -- they were able to nearly sell out with a minimum of advertising.

MUSIC

But, despite the bitter feeling of being duped by someone they trusted, Dylan fanatics still went through living hell to get an \$8.50 ticket as close as possible to their idol.

Getting good tickets was such a hassle that you had to be a real fan to put up with it. Information was leaked that a "major announcement" would be made on a local FM rock station at midnight Saturday, bringing about the rather sick scene of sitting around the living room listening to six hours of commercials in order to get a hint of what was going to be included on yet another commercial.

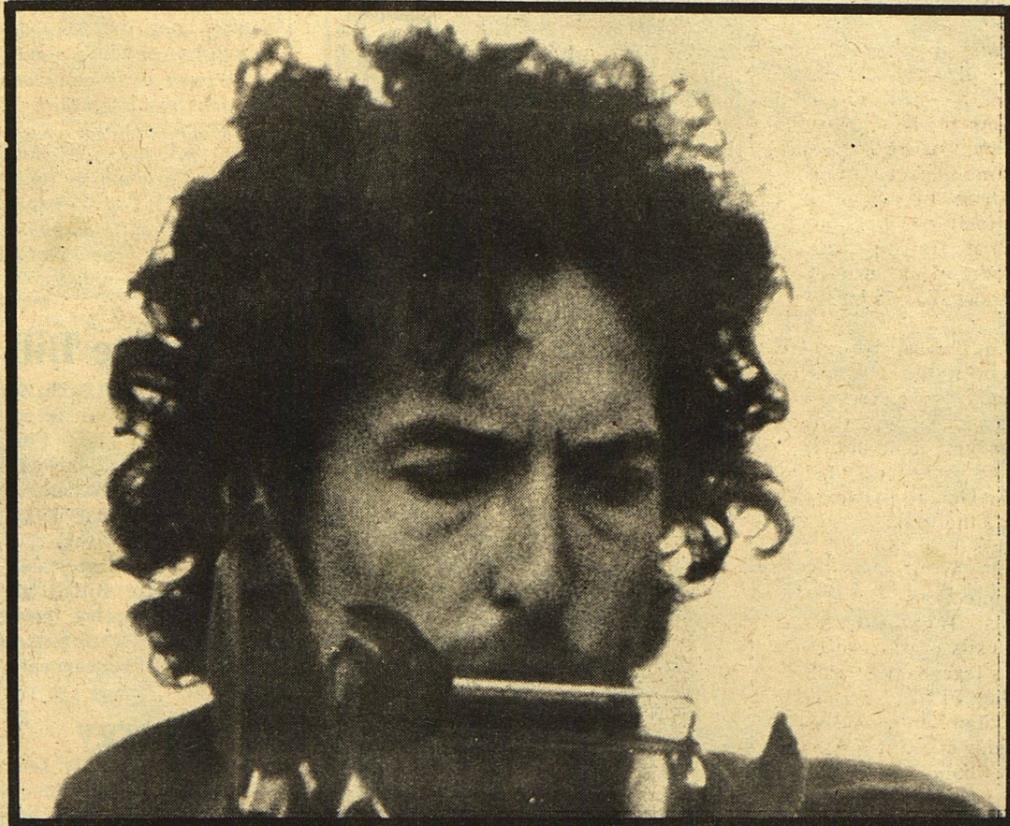
When the midnight announcement finally came -- right on the heels of screaming spots for concerts by J. Geils ("those bad, bad boys from Boston") and Z.Z. Top ("those three heavy dudes from Texas") -- that tickets would go on sale the following morning, but only at the Rochester War Memorial, listeners first groaned and then hurriedly made plans for early morning car trips to the deserted Upstate city.

A week later, however, as the late show of the Rolling Thunder Revue came to a close at 2 a.m., one listener who had earlier felt a fool, would ecstatically announce that it was worth every penny, every missed minute of sleep. Seeing Dylan -- devilish, authoritative, seemingly at ease -- was a renewing experience as well as an enjoyable show. In addition to being, as always, a singer and writer, he was once again an actor and entertainer.

The Rolling Thunder Revue was one half TV variety show, with Dylan's long-time folkie friend Bobby Neuwirth acting as emcee, making bad jokes and supplying singing to match, and one half Greek tragedy, with a white-faced Dylan playing the heavy to Joan Baez's wistful Medea.

The first part featured songs from each member of the band -- guitarists T-Bone Burnette, Steve Soles and Mick Ronson; David Mansfield on pedal steel, dobro and mandolin; Rob Stoner on bass, Howie Wyeth on piano and drums; and Luther Rix on percussion, in addition to Neuwirth -- as well as guest spots by Nashville star Ronee Blakely, who was stiff, Joni Mitchell, who was stark, and Ramblin' Jack Elliott, who was disappointing.

As soon as Dylan appeared, however, he became clearly dominant for the rest of the first half of the show. With no introduction, he plugged in and led the band through raucous versions of "When I Paint My Masterpiece," "It Ain't Me, Babe" and "It Takes a Lot to Laugh (It Takes a Train to Cry,)" all of which were aided considerably by Ronson's surprisingly good lead guitar work.



Dylan at last spring's SNACK concert in S.F.: now he's more authoritative and seemingly at ease

Dave Patrick

During the second half, Ronson's glitter gave way to Baez's glamor, as Dylan first shared the spotlight with her on a half dozen duets and then relinquished it to her altogether. And just as the Band showed their guts, as well as their class, by following Dylan with "Stagefright" on the winter 1974 tour, Baez showed her strength by starting out with "Diamonds and Rust," a song as universal in its emotion as it is specific in its target, Dylan.

Earlier, as she had put her arm around him as they sang "I Shall Be Released," she looked a bit pathetic, as if groping for something that wasn't there. But during "Diamonds and Rust," which traces a relationship that has gone on, in some form, for more than 10 years, it seemed almost as though she was keeping a scrapbook about his exploits, as Gatsby had done for Daisy Buchanan. Baez, however, is braver than Fitzgerald, singing her song on stage night after night, only to be followed 20 minutes later by Dylan singing his own, equally poignant, unrequited love song, this one to his estranged wife Sarah, his "sad-eyed lady of the lowlands."

While this kind of strange interplay between Dylan and Baez was the highlight of the evening, it did not overshadow the strength of Dylan's new material, which was featured prominently in both sets. "Durango," "Isis," "Hurricane" (all co-written with Jacques Levy, who has also collaborated with Revue member and former Byrd leader Roger McGuinn) and "To Sarah," all make the material from recent albums *Planet Waves* and *Blood on the Tracks* seem really bland in comparison.

"Hurricane," for example, which is spurred along by the violin playing of Scarlet Rivera, his song about the plight of former middleweight boxing champion Hurricane Carter, has a sense of drive and urgency that Dylan's work has not reflected in a long time. And, coincidentally or not, the New Jersey Supreme Court has recently agreed to rehear the case of Carter, who has been imprisoned for a murder he has always claimed he did not commit, thus adding yet another level of immediacy to the song.

While it was a far cry from the "welcome to your living room" atmosphere Neuwirth facetiously referred to at the beginning of the show, it was the kind of evening when the audience could pick out something about the personalities on stage that could help them understand the music a little better and that music, in turn, could then teach them a little more about themselves.

That's the most important message that Dylan offers and also about the best one that any audience is ever likely to get.

Special to the Barb

by Allen Young

SPRINGFIELD, MASS. -- Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, two cultural figures with a virtually universal appeal to those of us who identify with the left or the counter-culture, were on stage together recently for the Rolling Thunder Revue.

The revue has been playing in a series of special concerts to large and small audiences in several New England cities. I caught the November 6 show in Springfield's 10,000-seat Civic Center when a friend offered me some tickets. The friend happened to be Michael Meeropol, son of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

The concert had a definite feeling of reunion about it, not only for us but for the performers (it was Baez and Dylan's first time on stage together since 1965.) Arlo Guthrie was a surprise guest and even Allen Ginsberg appeared on stage for the finale, singing along and ringing his Buddhist bells.

POLITICS

The concert made me think a lot about generations. I attended with a large group of people, including a wonderful couple in their 30s and their two teen-age boys. Beforehand, we feasted on a home-made buffet, made our own hootenanny and we all got stoned together on some excellent pot.

It's hard to think of Arlo Guthrie without thinking of his father Woody, the communist troubador who, now dead, remains Dylan's poetic, spiritual and musical mentor. And when Dylan cried out for justice in his new song about "Hurricane" Carter, it was impossible not to think about Michael Meeropol sitting next to me and his courageous efforts to demand justice from the government that murdered his parents.

Dylan seemed happy with the revue and full of positive energy. The superstar-style reception and the price of the tickets (\$7.50) alienated me a bit, but Dylan captured my heart with his warm smile, his creativity and the fact that as a troubador he has always remembered victims of injustice.

Joan Baez told us we were a nice audience and she went out of her way to sing to the crowd who'd been sold tickets to seats behind the stage. She sang the labor classic "Joe Hill," a song I learned when I was a very young boy. Her rendition of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," a cappella, was hauntingly beautiful and reminded me of the fact that the appeal of "Negro spirituals" lies in the emotional outpouring they represent.

Songs of love -- true love and failed love and false love -- were basic offer-

ings of the revue. Dylan and Baez joined together for my very favorite old folk song, "The Water Is Wide," with its sad verses (I leaned my back up against a young oak/ thinking it was a trusty tree/ But first it bent and then it broke/ and thus did my false love to me).

There was a comradeship feeling in the audience. Dylan commented that he'd been reminded of the fact that Massachusetts was the only state that didn't vote for Nixon. "We didn't vote for him either," Dylan said, with a big grin, and everyone applauded enthusiastically. Some of us were hoping that Dylan would take this opportunity to tell the audience that Gerald Ford was going to be in Springfield the very next morning and that a protest rally was planned. I'd had those naive hopes before--that a "star" would say something about us, would verbalize, on stage, about certain connections between their music and politics. But it didn't happen before and it didn't happen now. The turnout at the next day's demonstration -- some 150 pickets, virtually all of them "movement" people -- was strikingly disappointing.

Despite 17 percent unemployment in Western Massachusetts, despite the widespread dissatisfaction with government in the area, despite a tradition of anti-government feeling that goes back at least to the small farmers' uprising led by Daniel Shays in the mid-1700s, the rally did not attract the masses of victims of Ford's repressive economic policies.

Many questions linger as to the relationship between culture and politics, between consciousness and action. For me and for Mike Meeropol, for example, there's a clear connection between listening to Baez and Dylan one day and greeting Ford with a picket line the next. The question is, do the other people listening to Dylan and Baez feel some of the same things we do, and if they do, why is a picket or rally so irrelevant or boring to them?

It's not enough for us to lament the small turn-out, but rather to do some soul-searching about the process. Is there something a bit ridiculous about some of our pickets and rallies? (I could feel some of that during some of the chants in Springfield: "Attica, Boston, We're no fools! Racism is the bosses' tool!" -- now just who is such poesy supposed to inspire?)

Concert-goers who applaud Dylan and Baez and the unemployed workers of Western Massachusetts certainly have much in common; in neither group, at least, is one likely to find flag-waving patriots who love their president. But neither group identifies with "the left" or "the movement." Facile claims about the "false consciousness" of the people do not seem reasonable any more. It's time for some creative introspection, for some analysis, for some redefinitions about politics and for some innovation.